

Public Speech

Tuesday, October 20, 2015

(On The Record)

Under Secretary Sewall – Kinshasa, DRC

Hello everyone. Thank you for being here this afternoon, and let me begin by thanking Father Nyembo and CEPAS for hosting this event today. I would also like to acknowledge several other people who are with us, Ambassador Swan and other members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished government representatives and members of parliament.

I really am so pleased to be with you all in Kinshasa. I can already see why people call this city Kin-la-belle. It pulses with warmth and energy –its food, its music, and most importantly – its people.

And this is my first visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the United States has a very deep and

longstanding commitment to this country. And I can see that in the remarkable dedication of Ambassador Swan and our Embassy staff, our new Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Tom Perriello, and the countless visits to this great and beautiful country by senior officials from the United States.

Most importantly, I see the U. S. commitment in how the United States has and continues to seek to connect with and support all of Congolese society – not just government, but also everyday people – like the students and parents that I saw earlier today, or the civil society activists that I will see in Goma, or the religious leaders with whom I will meet in Beni.

Because after all, a country's real strength lies in its people – that's as true of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as it is of the United States of America.

Countries thrive when governments not only protect their citizens' lives, but also respect their fundamental human rights – when citizens can safely and peacefully voice their

concerns and their hopes for the future and together chart a shared destiny.

In the last few days, I have met with many of your fellow citizens, and they recognize the long road ahead before the DRC can realize its full potential. But at the same time, they voiced cautious hope for the continued progress that this country has made and has continued to make since the darkest years of violence and bloodshed over a decade ago.

As you know, in recent years, the country has led this region in economic growth. It has achieved hard-won although unfinished success against armed groups like the M23, and it has brought a measure of security to communities that had long afflicted by strife – even though much work remains to end the violence. The government also has taken initial steps to hold accountable the perpetrators of horrific atrocities against civilians – whether those perpetrators fight against the state or on its behalf.

And in 2006, as you well remember, over 18 million Congolese took a powerful step forward by casting their ballots in the country's first democratic poll in over 40 years. After so much bloodshed, the election powerfully affirmed the people's desire to come together to peacefully resolve their differences and plan a common way forward. And many – both here and around the world – were hopeful that this milestone represented a new era of steady movement toward a more peaceful, just, and democratic future for this country.

However, nearly a decade later and with elections on the horizon, many Congolese have grown concerned that, despite progress on many fronts, political reform has stalled. Speculation grows that those now in power may not relinquish it – that elections, if they happen, will not truly reflect the voices of the people.

And so the DRC enters a critical juncture at this moment: will the country's future be written by the powerful or by the people?

And, on this question, history has a clear verdict: a country's long-term progress depends not on any one ruler – but on the citizens. When all men and women have a voice in shaping the country's future, they become more invested in building that future. When they have peaceful means of resolving their differences, and when governments respect their fundamental rights, they are less likely to resort to violence.

For many in the region, the uncertainty surrounding democratic elections can produce anxiety. Competition for power, as we know, can bring out the worst – in those who have it and those who seek it. For those in power, it can be tempting to change the rules in their favor, for example by ignoring or extending term-limits, postponing elections, or canceling voting all together. These people seek to justify their actions by arguing that they alone can assure continued stability, prosperity, and progress.

We don't have to look very far, however, to see how denying citizens their voice risks all three of those objectives.

Look at Burkina Faso, where President Compaoré tried to extend his 27-year rule against the express wishes of the people, and sparked a popular uprising and a year of turmoil – culminating in a failed military coup last month.

In Burundi, when President Nkurunziza defied the Arusha Agreement and sought a third-term, he plunged the country into violence, crippled the economy, and led to immeasurable suffering among his people.

International organizations like the World Bank have withdrawn financial support, and civil servants may soon go without pay. Since April, over 200,000 people have fled to neighboring countries – including many of Burundi's best and brightest citizens. The European Union has levied sanctions on several people for instigating violence, and the United States has issued travel bans. Now, the United

States is considering new measures to hold accountable those who would further destabilize the country – whether they are inside or outside the country.

In both Burkina Faso and in Burundi, leaders put their political self-interest above the people's voices – and the result was more violence, less growth, and fewer friends in the international community.

Rwanda, while it has made remarkable progress over the last decade against all odds –increasing economic growth and youth literacy, dramatically lowering child and infant mortality –has not kept pace with progress on the political front.

There have been unmistakable efforts in that country to stifle critical voices in civil society, in the media, and in the political opposition. And those who speak out often live in fear and face harassment or intimidation. Some have simply disappeared. While we celebrate Rwanda's progress, of course, sustaining it will require trust in the

people and the respect for democratic process and fundamental human rights.

President Kagame has repeatedly stated his commitment to respect the constitutional term limit, and the United States expects him to keep his word.

Just across the river here, in the Republic of Congo, President Denis Sassou N’Guesso has led his country out of a traumatic civil war and helped consolidate peace. Under his leadership, Congo-Brazzaville has seen progress in infrastructure development and has played a positive role in regional security initiatives, including the Gulf of Guinea and the Central African Republic crisis. However, President Sassou’s decision to hold a referendum on a new constitution that could allow him to seek another term is deeply troubling.

This proposed constitution was developed behind closed doors, with minimal public input, and was not widely available for review by voters during the campaign period.

In addition, the referendum is being held before the implementation of agreed-upon improvements to electoral governance that could make the result more credible. Some opposition members have been arbitrarily arrested and detained in recent days. And, in recent days, police fired live ammunition into a crowd, wounding several opposition supporters. The United States strongly urge all parties, including both the government and the opposition, to engage in dialogue and to refrain from violent actions that would undermine the hard-won peace that all citizens deserve.

As President Obama said at the United Nations last month, “leaders who amend constitutions to stay in office only acknowledge that they failed to build a successful country for their people.” Real leaders don’t define their legacy by how long they remain in office, but by what they accomplish in office to build a foundation for lasting progress.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo now faces a historic opportunity to build that foundation with the first peaceful transition of power in its history. It should do that by honoring its constitution and holding free, fair and timely national elections to select a new president and legislature.

Without question, there are considerable challenges to overcome before next November in order to hold a truly fair and credible poll in the DRC. Adequate resources and preparation are required, updating the voter list, educating the public about the electoral process, determining a feasible electoral calendar that prioritizes national elections, and improving security to allow for broad participation across the country. Government, opposition, and civil society should urgently resolve these issues to ensure a legitimate and inclusive electoral process that guarantees that elections are held before the end of 2016 in line with the constitution.

The United States believes there is an urgent need for an inclusive forum that would allow the country's political and

civic leaders to resolve these issues and reach broad consensus on the way forward. But this must happen quickly; discussion cannot become a pretext for delay.

Despite the challenges, it is clear that the Congolese people are eager to make history and usher in the country's first peaceful transfer of power. The protests this past January underscored their determination to write their own destiny and to stand against any attempt to discount their voices.

And the United States will continue to stand with the Congolese people to help their voices be heard. To that end, we have provided more than \$26 million on a range of initiatives – from assisting political parties to better reach and represent all Congolese citizens, to supporting civil society to educate voters about their rights and responsibilities, and training election observers to monitor for abuses. We are also working with the U.S. Congress to provide an additional \$1 million to strengthen security before and after the polling to reduce the risk of violence during this vulnerable period.

But the Congolese people deserve more than a free and fair election – they deserve a free and fair society. And here again, the United States stands ready to help. Last year, we partnered with regional governments to help launch the Africa Center for Justice, which helps the poorest and most vulnerable people stand up for themselves in the legal system.

We are providing an additional \$2 million for the *Accountability Initiative* that was launched by Secretary Kerry last year in order to fight impunity for sexual violence through creative legal approaches. An additional \$1 million will support legal aid clinics and mobile courts so that more Congolese have paths to justice. And just last month, we invested another \$1 million in South Kivu to professionalize the civilian justice system and to help teach 50,000 women how to use it.

Despite these efforts by ourselves and other international partners, it ultimately falls on the government to respect

their citizens' fundamental human rights and needs for justice. And here, we have cause for concern.

From the brutal murder in 2010 of renowned human rights advocate Floribert Chebeya, to the continued incarceration of so many activists like Christopher Ngoyi, *Cyrille Dowe, Jean Claude Muyambo, Vano Kiboko, and Ernest Kyaviro, the government has shown a willingness to violate its citizens' fundamental rights under dubious pretenses of national security. This past March, young activists were arrested simply while trying to engage more of their peers in the political process.

Two of these young people, **Fred Bauma and Yves Makwambala, spent months in detention without access to legal counsel, and four others were detained in Goma when they protested this action.

We know that the DRC faces real security challenges, but peaceful young activists are not among these security challenges. In fact, it is when people lack peaceful outlets

to make their voices heard, or when governments abuse their fundamental rights, that we often see violence.

Just look to the eastern parts of this country, where predatory groups like FRPI and various Mai Mai militias have sought to resolve their political grievances by taking up arms against the state and perpetrating horrendous atrocities against civilians.

The United States urges the government and MONUSCO to resume joint action against these groups to end the violence and preserve the DRC's territorial integrity. As long as communities in the east live under the shadow of violence and terror, they will never know the long-term stability and progress that they deserve and that this great country could make possible.

That is why the United States stands with the Congolese people to bring all who perpetrate atrocities against innocent civilians to justice. In that spirit, we applaud the government's cooperation with the International Criminal

Court and its “zero tolerance” policy toward sexual and gender based violence committed by security forces.

Sexual and gender based violence is regrettably widespread even in places far from armed conflict and affects both women and men. We cannot forget the thousands of Congolese boys and military-age young men who have been victims of systematic rape and murder by armed groups.

The Congolese government has taken important strides to address these crimes. This past March, the Congolese military and government ministers signed a pledge to combat rape in war and will require all commanders to strengthen their system for prosecuting alleged perpetrators of sexual violence. We applaud them for this precedent-setting action. Military courts have now convicted more than 180 individuals – including those from state security forces – for crimes related to sexual violence.

And just last month, 12 government soldiers, along with an FARDC general, were convicted for sexual violence, which is dramatic evidence that no one is above the law. This is just a start, however, given the magnitude of the problem. Too many survivors of sexual violence have yet to receive justice, and the United States, with its heart and with its programs, joins the Congolese people in calling for renewed efforts to provide that justice and to prevent that violence in the first place.

As elections approach, the Congolese people are calling for a lot from their government: they're asking for credible polls and a peaceful transition of power, for security, justice, and protection from violence. But in truth, the Congolese people are calling for something very simple, very human, and truly universal: the right to shape their own future. We urge the government to heed their call and to learn from those who did not – ultimately, the path to lasting progress runs through the people, and not around them.

Thank you very much.

*Cyrille Dowe was acquitted and released as of October 8, 2015.

**Fred Bauma and Yves Makwambala were held without access to legal counsel for seven months. They remain in pre-trial detention.